

# Introduction

## The Polish Golden Age – Current State of the Arts and Challenges

Similar to all of Latin Europe, the Renaissance period marks the beginning of the modern history of Polish culture. This period is fundamental to shaping the Polish identity – initially the political system (the republic of the gentry with an elected king), ultimately the mentality, customs and culture. It is also the first literary period whose works have been preserved in such great magnitude, allowing us a comprehensive picture of the literary and intellectual life of the epoch.

The above remark is necessary, as the beginnings of Polish literature seem to be lost in the oblivion of history – only a minor part of Medieval literature has survived, thus failing to render a complete picture of the epoch and its language. The beginnings of literature in Polish (one might just jokingly risk to compare it here to the one in Greek) are marked with two oeuvres both with a complex artistic form; this proves the very high literary culture and educational status of their authors who were familiar with the Latin tradition (and also, in the first case, the Greek one). These two works are: a hymn devoted to Saint Mary, *Bogurodzica*, a work with Latin and Byzantine roots, dated somewhere between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the collection of sermons, *Kazania Świętokrzyskie*, written according to the principles of *ars dictandi*, at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, although only discovered as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only these two first works allow one to assume that Polish Medieval literary output was much larger and older than its preserved manifestations. Such a supposition would also explain the unlikely ascendancy of Renaissance literature, which, since the 1430s, had begun to adapt European humanistic philosophical trends to reach its full potential in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The Renaissance period is the Golden Age of Polish culture. Humanism, which touched upon the senses of the entire European continent, fell here upon very fertile ground; this was also the outcome of the polit-

ical and economic situation of the great<sup>1</sup> republican federation known as the Commonwealth of the Two Nations (i.e. Polish and Lithuanian – and in fact Ruthenian, although many other ethnic minorities and religious groups were coexisting there). Poland lies on the great plains between the West and the East – this was a land which was good to domesticate and develop, and even easier to conquer, plunder and defeat. The Union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (comprising the territories of contemporary Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, and then temporarily some parts of Latvia, Estonia and Russia), made in 1385, strengthened both state organisms, allowed them to fight away and defeat the threat of the Teutonic Knights, and then for three more centuries enabling them to shield the territory from the growing powers of the East: Turkish-Tatar and Muscovy (the idea of *antemurale Christianitatis* – the defence of Latin Europe against the Muslim influx was part of the identity of Polish society). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, military conflicts were carried out rather in the border areas of the state, fortunately sparing the centre of country, whilst the religious wars during the period of the Reformation seemed to have the character of inter-religious disputes rather than conflicts causing persecution and victimisation.

The literature of the Polish Renaissance is, similarly as in other countries, a flowering of literary creativity both in the humanistic Latin and the vernacular – the Polish language (the time for the languages of other nations was still to come much later – although the Ruthenian language had a long tradition in Orthodox Christian literature, it did not take over the spirit of the Latin West). The Polish language of the works created at that time is surprisingly well developed in comparison with its scarce representations dating back to the preceding century and managed to meet the challenges of the epoch, by creating a set of terms and *topoi* equivalent to the classical ones. This was also the language in which the great humanistic poetry was created – mainly thanks to Jan Kochanowski, who, in this way, created the idiomatic language of the Classicistic poetry for the entire Slavic cultural sphere. Also, the writings in humanistic Latin were developing very well (though still insufficiently researched today) – serving science (in particular the perfectly developed mathematical-astronomical school, e.g. Copernicus's *De revolutionibus*), his-

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<sup>1</sup> In 1466 the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth covered a territory of ca. 260 000 km<sup>2</sup>, and in 1580 – 865 000 km<sup>2</sup>. It reached its largest surface area in 1634 covering ca. 990 000 km<sup>2</sup> – as much as contemporary France and Germany together. Cf. *Historia Polski w liczbach* [Polish History in Figures], vol. 1: *Państwo, społeczeństwo* [State, Society], edited by Franciszek Kubiczek et al.; the publication was worked out by Andrzej Wyczański et al. (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2003).

toriography (Kromer), ethics and political thought (e.g. Frycz Modrzewski, Goślicki) and oratory or lyrical poetry (e.g. Krzycki, Dantyszek, Janicki, Kochanowski). The attachment of Poles to Latin was to become even stronger in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century when Latin gained the status of the second language of the Polish-Lithuanian and Ruthenian nobility.

This quite paradoxical aspect of the culture of the discussed period deserves some emphasis. In the period of the Renaissance, the Polish national consciousness was created – and in spite of being identified with the nation's gentry, having more of a social layer nature than an ethnic one; it was centred around the Polish language, yet, at the same time, around Latin as well (as this was the language of the gentry and of the democracy of the gentry with its ideological references to the Roman republic, and – to take a closer example – the Venetian Republic). And at the same time, like in no other period, Polish culture had a pan-European dimension. Almost all Polish humanists who graduated from the Cracow Academy (founded in 1364 and restored in 1400 as a university), left to continue their studies in Italy (Padua, in particular, was a real Mecca for the Poles), also in Germany, the Netherlands and France. The contacts and friendships made there with the luminaries of Humanism were continually sustained by travels, correspondence, book exchange and following European novelties in publications. This is also the character of the literature created there – open to novelties and meeting the challenges posed by them – in both languages. And although the significant development of the Polish language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century can be attributed to great individuals such as Mikołaj Rej and, first and foremost, the ingenious Jan Kochanowski, they are undoubtedly the children of their epoch.

This feature of Renaissance culture was manifested, in particular, when contrasted with the next century, with the mentality, customs, ways of dressing and also artistic creation that gradually acquired more and more local traits. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural centre was focused around the royal court and the courts of bishops and also, more and more, within the progress of time, around magnate's courts which were in permanent contact with the rest of Latin Europe (the majority of Polish humanists performed royal and diplomatic services). A significant role is played also by the presence of print media – only in Cracow, in the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were twelve printing presses in operation (the first one being founded in 1473), publishing texts in Polish, Latin, also in Greek, Hebrew and Cyrillic. In the following century, however, when the country was stigmatised with the destructive wars against the

Cossacks, Tatars, Muscovians and the Swedish, culture was strongly decentralised, closed and focused around small manors of the gentry in the countryside. And although a large number of the gentry, having obtained their education mostly in Jesuit colleges, and sometimes in protestant ones, produced some literary output, quite frequently of good quality – mainly in Polish and also in Latin – the circulation of such texts was only local and the authors did not strive to have them published. This phenomenon was also the outcome of the significant destruction of the country's infrastructure, including printing presses which were once proliferous all over the Commonwealth, and also of the economic crisis after these wars.

This apparently obvious statement on the universal character of Humanist culture, should, however, be emphasised, given the story of the research of the literature of the Polish Renaissance, in particular, of its Latin part, which, in fact, comprises, the majority of the literary output of that period.

Polish academic research of Renaissance heritage, commenced in a methodological way in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was able to develop more freely as late as the twenty-year period between the two world wars. The outbreak of the war stopped the research, rendering it impossible: many specialists perished and the libraries and archives were burned down, causing irretrievable destruction to the significant, yet still unused, documents of the period; many important objects of culture and science after the war ended up in the hands of the soviet state doomed to be destroyed furthermore.

The revival of post-war science came under strong ideological pressure, but – contrary to the presumably “clericalised” Middle Ages and Baroque period (for example in the study of the Polish Reformation as an anti-Catholic movement) the period of Renaissance was believed to be “politically correct.” This was the price of regarding this epoch as the formative period of the native, Slavic language as opposed to Latin, which was then being pushed into the role of the language of the Church at the time of the “dark Middle Ages.”

State ideology was interested in tearing Poland away from its western cultural roots and therefore the Polish Renaissance was being deprived of its universality and Latin roots – constructive for this cultural formation. The Iron Curtain also separated Polish studies from the western equivalents which resulted in the pauperisation of both sides. On the one hand, the contacts of Polish academics with the works of their western colleagues were largely impeded; Polish works were carried out frequently in separation from western findings; on the other hand –

the western scholars studying the Renaissance did not know the Polish studies of the old literature and hardly ever considered, in their studies, this large part of Europe, whose cultural and political life at that time was flourishing and which strongly affected its neighbours, especially eastern and southern, transmitting those humanistic ideas into their territories.

Today, such a mutual opening is by all means necessary for both sides. The purpose of this volume is, at least to a limited degree, to fill in the lack of scientific analyses of the Polish Renaissance in western languages and also to invite foreign scholars to a debate about Polish humanistic literature. The articles of the Polish and foreign authors collected here, show a central European perspective on the view of the European Renaissance. At the same time, another important aspect of the volume is to outline the methodology of Renaissance studies – the history, current state of research as well as the newest trends and needs.

The beginnings of this volume were marked by an international conference, organised in 2005 by the Chair of Old Polish Literature, led by professor Andrzej Borowski in the Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University in Cracow. The Cracow centre, which has for many years been developing Renaissance studies, is currently the most active Polish scientific entity in this area of studies. The organisation of the above named conference became also the starting point of the Renaissance Studies Centre – currently the Renaissance Literature Laboratory ([www.renensans.polonistyka.uj.edu.pl](http://www.renensans.polonistyka.uj.edu.pl)), led by Grażyna Urban-Godziek PhD, created at the Chair. The Laboratory focuses its activity on the study of the classical and European sources of the Polish Renaissance, in particular of the Latin poetry of Jan Kochanowski (see [neolatina.bj.uj.edu.pl](http://neolatina.bj.uj.edu.pl)); it is also the meeting point of Renaissance scholars acting in many specific fields, who gather at lectures and debates every month in the beautiful rooms of the Renaissance palace of the great humanist, bishop Erazm Ciołek, which currently houses a section of the National Museum in Cracow, displaying early modern Polish art.

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